

## II

### THE POETRY OF PESSIMISM: GIACOMO LEOPARDI

#### I

**A**N Italian youth in his teens had roused scholars and Academies of scholars to admiration for his philological talents; the dispenser of literary reputations in his epoch had called him "the perfect Italian writer". To this lavish dispenser, Pietro Giordani, the youth, Giacomo Leopardi, wrote letters which are masterpieces of passionate style. They reveal him as engulfed in black melancholy and are all-important to the understanding of his pessimistic poetry. His happiness is wrecked, he writes, by ill health, which robs him of his one joy, study; wrecked also by his own thought: he must think, yet thinking tortures and consumes him. Condemned to solitude, denied the relief of escaping from himself, spent, shattered and almost blind, without diversion or hope, he is crawling towards his premature grave.

A tragic life it was, thus to reach its conclusion of despair at nineteen. Yet the early years had been happy with a scholar's joy and pride and dreams. The boy Giacomo—he was born in 1798—had been not too obviously frail, and amazingly precocious alike in ability and in ambition. His brother Carlo and sister Paolina readily yielded him the palm of leadership in all the children's games and pageants: he was the sweet-voiced Filzero, he the Achilles, the

Pompey; when the children played at mass, it was Giacomo who officiated as priest.

Up to the age of ten two tutors instructed the boy; after that began one of the most marvelous careers of premature self-directed study on record. The Palazzo Leopardi in Recanati housed a library of sixteen thousand volumes. It became the nursery of Giacomo's childhood and the graveyard of his adolescence. A devouring zeal for learning possessed the lad; in four months he learned Greek by himself, and then, in addition to his Latin and French, English and Spanish, and Hebrew so that he could argue with the Hebraists of Ancona! His brother Carlo, waking at midnight, would see him on his knees before his little table, poring over folios as big as himself. He read, he translated, wrote commentaries, collations, sermons and orations, verses in the classical manner, a poem on the Earthly Paradise, an epic in three cantos on the Three Wise Men, translations from Horace, a tragedy of his own, *Pompey in Egypt*. He required a catalogue of his works, beginning with 1809, when he was eleven! Three years later he began a History of Astronomy, to contain all doctrines philosophical and mathematical. He wrote Latin commentaries on Greek authors, collected fragments of second century Church fathers; wrote an essay *On the Popular Errors of the Ancients*, translated Homer's *Batrachomachia*, attempted the *Odyssey*.

These are not all juvenilia; some are readable even to-day. Creuzer had spent a lifetime on Plotinus, but in his third volume he could quote to advantage from the boy's work. Still in his teens, Leopardi played a learned prank on Italian Hellenists with his "Hymn to Neptune, of Uncertain Greek Authorship", alleged to have been discovered by a still less certain Signor Three Dots. Young Leopardi

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leaped from achievement to achievement, and he dreamed great dreams: already in correspondence with the learned, what a future awaited him! In his clerical habit he walked about town, climbed his favorite hill, watched the clouds, the Adriatic in the far distance:

With thoughts  
How vast, with what entrancing dreams the sight  
Of that far sea inspired me, those blue hills,  
Which yonder I discern and which some day  
I hoped to cross, and to my future feigned  
Worlds unexplored and unexplored delights!

But Nature is not so easily cheated, and it exacted a terrible price of the precocious ambitious genius, exacted it slowly but ruthlessly, and left him at the threshold of young manhood a complete physical wreck. The Leopardis suffered from a hereditary tendency towards rickets and nervous infirmities. To check the onset of these ills, Giacomo needed sound nourishment and a vigorous gay outdoor life. Six years of unremitting mental exertion, precisely during adolescence, ruined whatever chance his physique might have had. While the boy was learnedly mastering obscure folios, his bones were degenerating, his spine was being curved beyond redemption, his eyesight ruined. There emerged from the Leopardi library a hunchback with an emaciated face, protruding cheek-bones, a dilated mouth, complexion earthy and ugly: a rude jest of matter at the expense of mind.

Of his parents, the one who would have averted the disaster could not see it coming, and the other did not have eyes for anything of so slight importance. Count Monaldo Leopardi was a hopelessly orthodox and reactionary small-town savant, a thriftless nobleman and a passionate book-collector. He confessed he had searched for his betters without success; all the same, when confronted with bank-

ruptcy, he surrendered the entire management of his estate to his wife, and when the pittance she allowed him proved insufficient for his personal expenses, he would try to wheedle money out of her by pretending to be buying books, or else, in collusion with the servants, would resell wine and wheat which she had bought for the household. Very naturally he retired to that part of the house where he was allowed to reign undisturbed and innocuous. In his library Count Monaldo watched his first-born's mental progress with excusable pride: had he not collected the books which his son was reading, was he not Giacomo's literary guide? Perhaps an archbishop, a cardinal was maturing before his eyes (he was set on an ecclesiastic career for his son): how was this father to notice the impending bodily ruin? When Giacomo was a hopeless hunchback, Count Monaldo saw only another reason for his making a career in the Church: the ecclesiastic habit would make the hump less apparent.

Our poet was of course born of a woman; in truth, however, he had no mother. One does not have the heart to write objectively of the Countess Adelaide: adamant, avaricious, arrogantly pious. She was determined to restore the Leopardi fortune: but to restore it for whom? She did not care for her children, regarding them as liabilities. When her Pierfrancesco was born, she censured her husband's incontinence. She gave no sign of maternal love; her children's kisses were rebuffed: "Give them to Jesus!" she would say; no affectionate word was tolerated in their letters; they dared not inquire after her health. Coldest pious disdain of the earthly and the human mixed in her with the crassest greed. Her children were to her simply souls which she piously prepared for heaven, yet her whole life was absorbed in piling lira on lira. Giacomo was inexpensively and safely out of the way in the library. Not only

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did she neglect him in his boyhood; again and again she refused him assistance, when he manfully spent his mite of strength in trying to earn his way. The Leopardi fortune was restored, but the least of it was grudged to the one great Leopardi. If the memory of one's mother is a man's last support in a wretched world, Leopardi's mother would alone be sufficient to explain his midnight gloom. It is an unbelievable story, but husband, daughter and son bear witness to it. "I wish you could spend a single day in our house," Paolina wrote a friend, "to see how one can live without life, without soul, without body." Has ever man written of his mother what Leopardi wrote in his *Zibaldone*? I cannot bring myself to quote—one sentence must suffice: "She considered beauty a veritable misfortune, and seeing her sons ugly or deformed, she thanked God for it, not in a spirit of heroism, but with all her heart."

Doubly touching, by contrast, is the passionate devotion which bound Giacomo to his brother Carlo and sister Paolina. Other friends and attachments Recanati did not afford. The townsfolk had felt him superior and had thought him proud; now they saw him humped and emaciate; they had their chance at him, and they took it. They mocked him for his deformity which they could see, and sneered at his genius which they could not understand. The town urchins made a vile round of doggerel to ridicule the hunchback when he appeared on the street. In vain the uncle Carlo Antici wrote from Rome, as early as 1813, urging the need of rest and change of environment, and inviting Giacomo to his home. In vain the youth himself, already wrecked and finding life in Recanati intolerable, begged for permission to leave. Paternal vanity and affection would not permit the young candle to burn anywhere but in the Leopardi library. To Countess Adelaide, Giacomo's

scholarship and genius were no source of additional income. Even in her safe and sane Recanati she allowed her children no diversions and no freedom whatever: was she now to let Giacomo wander into the wicked and wasteful world? She was far too pious and penurious for that. Bitter and pathetic are the lines in *Le ricordanze*, that masterpiece of Italian blank verse, of which, as of all Leopardi's poems, Mr. Bickersteth has given us such fine English versions, which I quote:

Here I drag on, forsaken, all obscure,  
Without love, without life; and growing harsh,  
As needs I must mid this malignant crew.  
Here, self-despoiled of virtue and charity,  
I make myself a scorner of mankind  
By reason of the herd which hems me round.  
Away, the while, flies cherished youth, more prized  
Than fame and laurels, more than the pure light  
Of day and breath of being: without one joy,  
Vainly, in this inhuman dwelling-place  
Mid trouble piled on trouble, I lose thee  
My barren life's one solitary bloom.

## II

Like a ray of light in his prison, his correspondence with Pietro Giordani flooded his soul with the life of the great world of letters. Giordani's praises sustained and exalted the wretched youth; his letters also helped to perfect Leopardi's spiritual transformation. The change had been going on for some time. The young pedant, engrossed in philological erudition, became a lover of true poetry, became a lover and himself a poet. Translating the poetry of others no longer satisfied him. The love of poetry served to rouse the lyrical mood; the complacent though miserable little scholar saw himself with the clear eyes of the poet:

I feel life's flame within me almost dead;  
And, gazing round me, in the world there's nought  
That I can now behold save my death-bed.

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I feel o'erwhelmed by the vast weighty thought,  
So that, with speechless lips and visage blanched,  
I hide my pain no longer: it will out.

Love itself was to him no longer mere literary material; Geltrude Cassi made him feel its bittersweet empire, made him a young Petrarch. Partly in rebellion against his father's bigotry, partly under the influence of Giordani's liberalism, his entire political outlook on life altered. His religious orthodoxy followed the same road as his political conservatism. Black despair engulfed him. "What do you say of diversion?" he writes Giordani. "My single diversion in Recanati is study; my single amusement is that which is killing me; all else is weariness, *noia*."

The publication of Leopardi's two patriotic poems, which followed Giordani's five days' visit to Recanati, brought his life to a crisis. The *canzoni* marked the poet's full revolt against his father's reactionary politics; with one leap Leopardi found himself in the front rank of Italian writers, but not in the estimate of his father. Doubly distrustful now, Monaldo flatly refused his son's petition to leave Recanati. Leopardi determined to run away from home, and sought to secure a passport, but his father discovered the plot, and Carlo did not have an opportunity to deliver the letter in which Giacomo was to bid his father farewell: "I would rather be unhappy than undistinguished: I would rather suffer than be bored: so much more injurious do I find boredom (*noia*), in my case the mother of deadly melancholy, than any bodily disease." The son had to submit to his father, but the incident cost Count Monaldo the last scrap of his trust and devotion. His mother had never had them.

Giordani and other friends tried to secure for him a paying position in Lombardy, at Bologna—in vain. A period

of melancholy stupor was followed by a strange readjustment and a grim resignation. His imagination came as his ally against suicidal reason. In view of his physical and mental state, is it a wonder that he did not kill himself? A greater wonder, in the face of it all, is the vigor of his creative imagination. During these killing years in Recanati he was writing poetry, prose, literature, philology, philosophy, and all the while he was almost blind. Towards the end of 1820 his health improved, and he plunged into work again, studying in particular philosophy. Of the seven volumes of his *Zibaldone* of thoughts on literature, life, and philosophy, the year 1820 had contributed less than three hundred pages, but during the following year he wrote over eleven hundred pages! Naturally, in the course of the summer, he wrote Giordani: "My eyes have turned me into an owl, hating and shunning the daylight."

In the fall of 1822 Leopardi was at last permitted to go to Rome, as a guest of his Uncle Carlo Antici. But Rome was not Rome to the young poet. To his brother Carlo he recounted his heart-breaking disappointment. Modern Rome was not the Eternal City for which the young poet and classical scholar had longed; it was simply a big bulky town. The women were ugly, the men stupid; they shrank from ideas and did not care for real literature. Some of this may be mere tactics, not to appear unsafely jubilant over his escape from Recanati. But one cannot doubt the meaning of his report that only at the grave of Tasso did he find real relief and joy, in tears. "For God's sake, love me," he exclaims in a letter to Carlo, "I need love, love, love, fire, enthusiasm, life." He failed in his effort to secure satisfactory employment. Angelo Mai, now Librarian at the Vatican, did not assist him, and Niebuhr, the classicist and Prussian ambassador, most faithful in his effort, obtained



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nothing Leopardi could accept. Later Niebuhr tried to get him to go to Berlin, to Bonn, as professor; but the Italian feared the rigors of the German winter. A career in the Church he would not consent to, now or at any time.

The spring of 1823 saw him back in Recanati. He began the writing of his *Operette morali*, contributed to the *Antologia*. At last a position came his way: the publisher Stella asked him to come to Milan to direct a new edition of the works of Cicero and do other literary work for him. Leopardi left Recanati for the second time, stopping on his way at Bologna. He was now twenty-seven, yet two-thirds of his life had already been spent. Ten days in Bologna with Giordani and his friends had pleased him so much that he returned there from Milan to work for Stella; to increase his salary he gave language lessons to the Counts Pepoli and Pappadopoli. During the cold winter he had to keep to his room, wrapped up in a sack of feathers. Bologna, taking Giordani's lead, welcomed him as a great scholar and poet, and for the first time since childhood Leopardi had a taste of happiness. The work he had to do, however, was beyond his strength, and, to cap it all, he had to convince his father, who was doing nothing to help him financially, that it was not below the dignity of a Leopardi to work for a publisher and to give language lessons! The winter of 1826 he spent in Recanati, compiling an Italian prose anthology for Stella, returned the following spring to Bologna, proceeded in June to Florence, where he was welcomed in the liberal Vieuksseux-Capponi circle of the *Antologia*. Here he met Alessandro Manzoni, his peer in genius and his contrast in experience and in philosophy of life. Physically he was very miserable in Florence, suffered from bad teeth and eye-troubles (he had to stay indoors until sundown); add to this stomach-ailments. The initial welcome

of the optimist liberals cooled perceptibly after they had time to digest his *Operette morali*. In the fall of 1828 he removed to Pisa, where climate and environment suited him, and where he resumed creative poetry which had lagged for several years. At the University the students applauded him; he was in tolerably good health. But the respite was short. His brother Luigi's death was a severe shock to his extremely nervous state, and he found himself increasingly unable to work for Stella, after the completion of the anthology of poetry, and felt he could not honorably accept the publisher's money. The terrible night, *orrenda notte*, of Recanati confronted him again. There he had to return from Florence, in November, 1828, with an apology to his father for bringing with him overnight his young friend Vincenzo Gioberti.

Now there seemed to be no release from his black prison-house; but once more his poetic imagination came to his rescue: to this dismal year and a half we owe some of his finest lyrics, including *Le ricordanze* and *Canto notturno*. Unbelievable spectacle: the man is almost a corpse, yet he creates masterpieces of the most painstaking and perfect artistry, and to Pietro Colletta he sends a list of his projected works: literary, political, moral, metaphysical, psychological, philosophical, philological, including an elaborate comparative study of the five languages, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish! His despair beat down his pride, and he finally accepted Colletta's offer of anonymous subscriptions for his support. Relying on this aid, he left Recanati on April 29, 1830, never to return. Pathetic in its deep gratitude is the letter in which he dedicates the 1830 edition of his poems to his Tuscan friends: "I have lost all: I am a log which feels and suffers," but "your love will remain with me all my life, and will perhaps stay by

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me even after my body, which is already dead, has turned to ashes." He entrusted the manuscripts of his philological works to Professor De Sinner of the Sorbonne, who was to edit and publish them, but who disappointed Leopardi's hopes. The winter of 1831-32 he spent in Rome together with the young Neapolitan Antonio Ranieri, whose devotion to the poet was to be the last refuge of his dolorous days. Before returning to Florence in the spring he had been elected member of the Accademia della Crusca.

What bound him to Florence now was a passion, the most violent of his whole life and the last, for Signora Fanny Targioni-Tozzetti, wife of a Florentine professor. Friends he had; friends who admired, pitied, helped; but in no woman had he evoked genuine love. The Recanati girls whom he watched out of his window died at the dawn of youth, leaving only memories which he later wove into lyrics. Signora Geltrude Cassi, who spent a few days at the Palazzo Leopardi with her daughter, did not even know that she had roused the first real passion in the heart of the nineteen-year-old library eremite. Some years later he loved Contessa Teresa Carniani Malvezzi, a brilliant blue-stocking who tried to keep to literature and friendship and, becoming frightened, terminated the relation. And here in Florence he was to lose his heart yet a third time, to a frivolous coquette who found pleasure in having the first poet of Italy hanging on the least flutter of her eyelashes and collecting for her autographs of famous men all over Europe. Herself pursuing Antonio Ranieri, she used Leopardi as a handle to hold his friend. Cruelly she humiliated the proud poetic soul, but when once Leopardi shook off the baneful enchantment he emerged finally disillusioned, passion-proof. *Consalvo, Aspasia, A se stesso*

are the poetic chronicles of this great passion and of the revulsion from it.

His father's publication of the ultra-reactionary *Dialoghetti*, which the public had mistakenly attributed to Giacomo, caused the poet publicly to repudiate the book, and this fact made it doubly hard to do the necessary thing now that all his sources of income, including the Florentine, were exhausted: apply to his father for a regular allowance. He did so, and was told that he should have to apply to his mother. And he had to do it, for the twenty scudi a month that were finally granted him. Ranieri's insistence finally took him to Naples where the two arrived in October, 1833 and where, until his death on June 14, 1837, the great poet of the dolorous life found, if not love, yet devoted friendship and tireless nursing at the hands of Ranieri and Ranieri's sister Paolina. A bright page, but the end of it is flecked: forty years later Ranieri could write a book of self-righteous abuse of Leopardi's memory.

In Naples the dying Leopardi wrote the satirical epic, *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*, and also his greatest poem *La Ginestra*, The Broom-Flower, blooming on the desert slopes of Vesuvius, where his own last days were spent, in view of the volcano, reminder of the ashen nothingness of all things living and the futility of all effort. Here friends visited him, notably the German poet Platen. Shall we again recount his maladies old and new: a swollen knee and leg, digestive ills, violent nosebleed, asthma, neurasthenia, inflammation of the lungs, dropsy, general bodily disintegration? In this already decayed body the spirit was alive and creative until the last breath. The closing lines of his poem *Il tramonto della luna* Leopardi dictated two hours before he expired.

## III

Writing to De Sinner in 1832, Leopardi protested against those who attributed his pessimistic philosophy to his ill health (thus Niccolini: "I am a hunchback and ill, therefore there is no God"): "Before dying I shall protest against this weak and vulgar notion, and beg my readers, instead of blaming my illnesses, to turn to the disposal of my observations and reasonings." Leopardi's protest is warranted against those who would treat his ideas as purely pathological phenomena only of clinical interest. But the adequate interpretation of Leopardi's pessimism requires also an insight into his own dolorous life. His judgment of life was not the result simply of impassive external observation but also of intensely tragic personal experience. The truth is well expressed by Mestica: Leopardi's pessimism is essentially lyrical. The poet and the philosopher were not two men but one.

Turning from his erudition to consider his own life, in a lyrical introspective mood, young Giacomo is overwhelmed with melancholy. Bewailing his lot in his letters to Giordani, he enlarges on the idea in his *Zibaldone*: "I was terrified to find myself in the midst of nothingness, and myself nothing. I felt as if suffocated with the thought and feeling that all is nothing, just nothing." Recoiling in horror from his present, he seeks refuge in the past. Life is bad; it is getting worse; but it has not always been bad. This is the consolation of the classical scholar: consolation and double bitterness in the contemplation of the Golden Age. In the life of the race, as in his own life, the age of childhood, the Age of Fable, is the happy one. Ancient thought was constructive, creative; modern thought is mainly negative, destructive, critical. Against the

straightforward nobility and happiness of the ancients, Leopardi sees modern society petty, disillusioned, irresolute and unheroic: this is the sting of the early patriotic odes:

Oh turn, my native country, and look back  
On those bright multitudinous companies,  
And weep, and cry out on thyself with scorn.

Rebelling against the miserable pretenses of civilization, Leopardi joins Rousseau in sighing after the spontaneity and naturalness of primitive man, with his unquestioning trust in truth, beauty, virtue, love. Not only has civilization corrupted man and blighted his life with ills of body and soul; it has also enslaved him; it has robbed him of the very conditions of happiness. So Leopardi writes in his *Zibaldone*, on his first sally into the great civilized world, in Rome: Man would be happy could he always retain the blessed illusions of his youth; by himself man would have held fast to these illusions; it is social life which has served to disillusion the individual; society is therefore the original and continuous cause of human unhappiness; the natural life of man, the happy life, is thus a life of solitude. Thus the youth who had been eating out his heart in lonely Recanati.

Contrary to general opinion, from Aristotle's down, Leopardi regards man as the least social of all beings. Having more vitality than other animals, man has more self-love, and is thus more anti-social. Back of all human motives is this basic instinct of self-preservation and self-assertion; it is vigor, energy, drive. Developed as it is usually into the deliberate pursuit of selfish ends to the disadvantage of others, it becomes explicit egoism; the desire for our own happiness makes us haters of our fellows; the fountain-head of our weal becomes the source of wickedness and woe. The desire for pleasure is limitless;

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satisfaction is decidedly limited; we are thus doomed to disappointment; and the stronger a man's desires the more unhappiness is in store for him and the more unhappiness is he likely to cause. There is no hope in prospect: civilization and so-called progress only multiply our desires and accentuate the selfishness of men. Jesus himself recognized this natural and miserable proclivity to evil, and by calling it "the World" emphasized the antithesis of nature and virtue. "My Kingdom is not of this world."

So here is man as reason reveals him to us: naturally engrossed in futile selfishness: miserable and wicked. Not easily do we face this truth; the lure of happiness is too strong:

The boy, like a raw lover, hotly woos  
His life, though it will cheat him.

A youth rises from his books sanguine in his hopes that, whatever life may bring to others, his own life will be a happy one, virtuous and ardent. But life in due time teaches us all its own grim lesson: we see that ruthless cold selfishness, hatred and envy, slander and deceit, are not exceptional; we are disillusioned, and lose the sole comfort and happiness of our being. Justice, patriotism, glory, faith, love: these are disclosed to us as illusions, phantoms; but without them our life is of no avail and our world is naught. We find ourselves in pursuit of a felicity which is forever beyond us: "always desirous, although incapable, of infinity," we are forced to realize that his house of bliss is founded on sand.

Is it any wonder that men cleave to the phantoms of blessedness? Like the lover in Leopardi's dialogue on Tasso, who, whenever he dreamt of his lady, avoided her the next day, knowing that the actual sight of her would only spoil the greater beauty of his own vision of her, even

so we all shrink from the unlovely actualities of life, and "praise and exalt those opinions, though untrue, which generate acts and thoughts noble, energetic, magnanimous, virtuous, and useful to the common or the private weal; those fancies beautiful and joyous, though vain, that give worth to life; the natural illusions of the mind". If increased knowledge thus robs man of his source of happiness by dispelling his illusions, is not Rousseau right in calling a thinking man a corrupted being? A destroyer of phantoms, philosophy leaves man with nothing to sustain him, and is thus a bane not a blessing.

All the same, though illusions be precious, disillusionment is inevitable:

Phantom-shapes, nought else  
Are glory and honour; prosperity and joy  
A mere desire; life is without use,  
Unprofitable woe.

The truth, if truth there be, is that there is no real and absolute truth, nor any other stable value. This is Leopardi's principle of relativity. British and French empiricism influenced his view of the impermanence of value, but more particularly was he brought to this conviction by his æsthetic studies which revealed to him the instability of the beautiful. Beauty is a matter of shifting taste and opinion. There is no proving beauty to him who does not see or feel it; it is undemonstrable because purely conventional; it reflects custom, the prestige of popular renown; or else it expresses illogical caprice: in either case it is altogether relative.

The other values are no better off. Good and evil are nothing absolute. A horse may disapprove of a wolf devouring a sheep, but the carnivorous soul of the lion would not condemn the wolf, would only envy him. Good is good



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and evil evil simply with regard to this or that particular being. Morality is a matter of *mores*. Protagoras did not go altogether astray. Of truth and knowledge, the more we attain the more we perceive their sinuous unreality. This melancholy conclusion the young scholar of Recanati had reached early; in the very first volume of his *Zibaldone* is a weary exclamation: "Oh infinite vanity of truth!" Thought and knowledge are not only unattainable; they are unnatural and baneful to man. Hebrew allegory here agrees with the Greek: eating of the Tree of Knowledge cost man his Eden; the myth of Psyche teaches the same moral. "He who does not reason does not err. . . . He who does not think is wisest of all." There is no absolute stable infinite value. There is nothing infinite; all is finite, relative and impermanent. The infinite is a mere idea; it is simply the horizon, the ocean of the unattained which always stretches just beyond our vision. We know and we can know no infinite.

Leopardi would save, if possible, the fundamentals of religion. God's infinite perfection, negated in an absolute sense, may be accepted as relative: perfection as we understand perfection, relatively. But it will not do: the notion of Divine Providence must go with the other illusions. Is it not, after all, an instance of what may be called the geocentric predicament of our uncritical view of things? Man has imagined himself the crown and goal of creation, has conceived the entire course of things as explicitly designed to serve human ends. Time had been when Leopardi, despairing of life about him, had bewailed its unnaturalness, still confident of the all-wise benignity of Mother Nature. But the gloom deepens in his soul with the growing conviction that Nature is no mother to us: step-mother, rather, to whom all our woes and agonies of soul and body

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are naught. The materialistic strain in Leopardi, connected with the French origins of his metaphysics, discloses itself in his developing view of nature. The world-course is not a Divine pageant of Providence, but brute, blind, unresponsive matter. We are lumps of thinking matter, drifting along in the stream of nothingness. Spirit is a mere word: matter is all-in-all. Yet even of this we cannot be ultimately certain, for metaphysics in the last chapter is a blank:

Inscrutable  
Is all, save pain.

But, you say, is it not absurd to think that, with infinite pains, nature should produce so fine creatures as ourselves, only to cast them aside? Is it absurd? Here is a boy that most painstakingly has made a toy, a house of blocks, and—with one wave of the hand or one kick wrecks it all and turns to something else. So Nature tells the poor Ice-lander: "Do you imagine that the world was created solely for you? . . . If I injure you in any way, or by any means, I am not aware of it, or very seldom; nor if I delight or benefit you, am I conscious of it. . . . And finally, if by some accident I happened to destroy all your race, I should not be aware of the fact." A little classic on the geocentric predicament of man's vanity is the dialogue *Il Copernico*. The more we realize the immensity of the universe, the more clearly is our own petty insignificance exhibited. A stanza of sombre grandeur and majestic melancholy from *La Ginestra* haunts the mind: Leopardi on the slopes of Vesuvius ponders on the vanity of human life:

Oft times upon these slopes,  
Desolate, sombre-clad  
In the now hardened flood which still seems surging,  
I sit by night; and o'er the landscape sad  
Watch in pure azure skies

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The constellations star by star emerging,  
 To which yon ocean lies  
 A distant mirror, till in calm profound  
 The world with sparks is glittering all around.  
 And when I gaze on those far bodies bright,  
 To me mere specks of light,  
 And yet in truth so vast  
 That land and sea, therewith in contrast brought,  
 Are but a speck; to which  
 Not only Man, but even  
 This globe, where Man is nought,  
 Is quite unknown; and when my eyes I cast  
 On star-groups, poised in heavens beyond our heaven,  
 Which distance so enshrouds  
 They seem to us like clouds, to which not Man  
 And not earth only, but these stars of ours  
 In magnitude and number infinite  
 With the sun's golden light, all blent in one,  
 Either are unknown or, remote as they  
 To earth, appear a speck  
 Of nebulous radiance; what then in my sight  
 Appearest thou, O son  
 Of Man? When I remember  
 Thy state on earth, of which the soil I tread  
 Bears witness, then in contrast call to mind  
 That of this mighty Whole  
 Thyself thou deem'st as lord and end designed,  
 And how it oft hath pleased thee to fable  
 That to this obscure grain of sand, called Earth,  
 The authors of this universe descended  
 For thy sake, and not seldom would with thee  
 Converse familiarly, and that this age  
 Insults good sense by giving vogue once more  
 To long-derided myths, although of all  
 It seems instructed best,  
 And most enlightened; what, then, shall I call  
 The feeling, what the thought, that in my breast  
 I entertain of thee, poor mortal seed?  
 Is laughter or is pity thy due meed?

So the starry dome of heaven, which had turned Kant's mind to the thought of the moral law, stirs Leopardi's thought to the desolate conclusion of the indifference of ruthless nature.

More than Giacomo Leopardi's woe is involved here, more than the hopeless state of Italy, of mankind. A stone hurled from a cliff into an Alpine lake stirs the quiet depths

in increasingly spreading circles and shivers the still reflections of tree and mountain and shore-line. Thus, Carducci observes, in Leopardi's poetry personal human happiness sinks in the confused depths of cosmic infelicity, *doglia mondiale*. This is not the world-woe, *Weltschmerz*, of the romanticists; Leopardi's doctrine of *infelicità* expresses the grim conviction that the misery of mankind is inevitable, essential and unaccountable. Infelicity and mystery: behold our life and world. We may think our unhappiness the result of unlucky or malign accident, and remediable: if this or that had not been, all had been well with us—and would be yet, if only this or that were to transpire. Miserable by necessity, we insist on believing ourselves miserable by accident. So a man lying on a hard and uncomfortable bed turns from side to side and thus spends the whole night, always hoping that the next turn will make him comfortable. But the truth is that the bed itself is wrong, and impossible it is in any position to find comfort on it.

Nought is worthy  
Thine agonies, earth merits not thy sighing.  
Mere bitterness and tedium  
Is life, nought else; the world is dust and ashes.  
Now rest thee. For the last time  
Abandon hope. Fate to our kind hath given  
No boon but death. Now scorn thyself, scorn Nature,  
Scorn the brute Power whose reign  
We know but by our woes, which are its pastime;  
Scorn all that is, for all is vain, vain, vain.

This inevitable evil of our mortal state Leopardi's intellect explains in materialistic terms of blind necessity, unresponsive indifferent nature. But his imagination projects the shape of a woeful malign Power, whose vast outlines are only suggested in the fragment of his uncompleted *Hymn to Ahriman*:

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Re delle cose, autor del mondo, arcana  
 Malvagità, sommo potere e somma  
 Intelligenza, eterno  
 Dator de mali e reggitor del moto. . . .

(Lord and Creator of all things, unfathomed  
 Iniquity, consummate power and consummate  
 Intelligence, eternal  
 Fountain of woes, director of all motion. . . .)

In the last volume of the *Zibaldone* there is a black entry: "All is evil. That is, all which exists, is evil; that all things exist, is an evil. . . ." This wholesale damnation is re-tailed in a hundred maledictions all through Leopardi's works. Man is ferocious, destructive, odious; hatred and envy devour him. Women have a taste for each other's misfortunes. "Man is always as wicked as his needs require," we read on the last page of his published Works, and the last page of the *Zibaldone* is a pessimist's rosary: "Men regard life as Italian husbands do their wives: they must needs believe them faithful, although they know them to be otherwise. . . . The rarest thing in society, a really endurable person. . . ." Turks, Leopardi says, are inferior to their horses; and on the score of happiness he repeatedly prefers the lot of animals to that of men; the lines from the *Night-Song of a Nomadic Shepherd of Asia* are the first that come to the mind:

O flock of mine reposing, happy flock,  
 Of your own woe, methinks, quite unaware!  
 How do I envy you! . . .

And more boldly even, Leopardi prefers the utterly unconscious life of the *ginestra* blooming on the slopes of the volcano:

And thou beneath  
 The deadly weight shalt unresisting bow  
 Thine innocent head full low:  
 But not bowed up till then in fruitless prayer  
 Or mien that cowards show to supplicate

The future tyrant: neither head erect,  
With frantic pride aspiring to the stars,  
Scorning the desert, where  
Thou hadst both birth and home,  
Not of thy choice but such as chance allowed:  
But wiser, but so far  
Less weak in this than Man, that thou didst never  
Deem thy frail stock endowed  
By fate or thee with power to live forever.

The logic of these preferences is clear, and Leopardi draws it: non-existence were better than this our life. The greatest blessing Juno could bestow on Biton and Cleobis, beloved sons of her priestess, was to make them die gently in the same hour. For even the unconscious existence of plants and flowers is a spectacle of woe. "Enter a garden of plants, herbs, flowers. Be it as flourishing as you please. Be it in the best season of the year. You can't turn your eyes in any direction without finding suffering. . . . This rose is hurt by the sun which has given it life; it shrivels, languishes, withers. . . . Ants have infested this tree, grubs the other, flies, slugs. . . . The gardener goes wisely breaking, cutting live branches. . . ." This passage should not be mistaken for maudlin: it is characteristic, not of the sentimentality, but of the morbid sensitivity of Leopardi.

#### IV

In a world thus revealed to his reason as vain, wicked, worthless, what is man to do? Obstinate hope for a better life after death, or turn a misanthrope, or seek refuge in disdainful apathy, or in suicide? Leopardi glanced down some of these paths, but he did not follow any one of them.

Of relief and peace in the hereafter, Leopardi's thought registers a gradual extinction. With the abandonment of his religious beliefs and his trust in Providence, his belief

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in immortality is also eclipsed. To be sure there is his letter of farewell to De Sinner, written six months before his death, in which he expresses the fear that he won't see him again "unless it be 'on the fields of asphodel.'" Is this simply one Hellenist quoting Homer to another, or shall we conclude with Sainte-Beuve and Carducci that to his last breath Leopardi cherished a lingering *perhaps* about a life after death? Be that as it may, certain it is that the entire course of Leopardi's thought discourages hopes of immortality. The world will not alter after my death; it will continue to be the same callous nature: what grounds do I have for any hopes? Proving the soul a simple entity, in good scholastic manner, avails nothing: if you are so uncertain and mysterious about the origin of this unique simple entity, what can you really know about its destiny? Why may it not perish, despite its simple substantiality, in ways as unknown to us as those in which it is alleged to originate and to exist alongside perishable compound flesh and blood? Not along the path of hope lay Leopardi's course: "Hopes of glory or immortality are things concerning which even the time to laugh is gone by."

A misanthrope and a hater of his kind Leopardi never was. While his ills and deformities robbed him of woman's love, the devoted friendship which he commanded in so many men and women was certainly an index of his character: ardor with patience, kindness with heroism, candor without insolence: here was one who pitied, who smiled with grim irony, but to whom malice was alien. Giulio Levi calls him "an angelic nature fallen in a lower world."

He had his Stoical moments, of course, but his was an apathy of utter indifference, not the Stoic's serene acquiescence in the ways of Providence. By actual experience he found that resignation diminished pain, and remembered

how, when little Luigi had thrown Pierfrancesco's fishing-rod out of the window, the lad's weeping had subsided upon his mother's saying that *she* would have thrown it out anyhow! Leopardi knew the hedonistic paradox and showed an occasional streak of Taoistic wisdom: indifference to happiness is more likely to lead to happiness than the pursuit of it. But, while man can suffer passively, he will not work in vain; resignation breeds torpidity, and Leopardi was consumed with a zeal for achievement. Indifference to pain, to evil, perhaps; but apathy with regard to his activity and creativeness was impossible to him. Here is a man who to the Stoic list of *adiaphora*, things that do not matter, had added reason also, the Stoic rock of reliance. Yet, holding life nothing worth, he yet held to the last scrap of life and was creatively active to the end.

Why did he not commit suicide? Is it because "life is a thing of so little moment that a man, as regards himself, should not be very anxious either to retain it or to leave it"? He was not always so indifferent. The idea of suicide haunted Leopardi from the days of his disenchanted youth. The lines from the *Ricordanze* come at once to the mind:

Already in my youth's first turbulence  
Of ecstasy, of anguish and desire,  
Ofttimes I called on death, and hours by hours  
Would lean o'er yonder fountain, pondering  
The thought that 'neath its water I might quench  
All hope and grief forever. . . .

He argues the matter with himself: is suicide contrary to nature? But is it more unnatural than continuing this our unnatural life? To the subject of suicide Leopardi devoted his *Dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyry*, and *The Younger Brutus* and *Sappho's Last Song* lead plainly to the suicide's conclusions.



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When a brave man is bold  
And death to life prefers,  
Shall nature blame his weapon as not hers?

So Brutus; and Sappho:

Death be our choice. Casting to earth the veil  
It scorns, the naked soul shall fly to Dis  
And mend the brutal blunder of the blind  
Distributor of luck.

Leopardi sang of Brutus and Sappho, but his own choice was the choice of Plotinus. But Plotinus' own final counsel scarcely expresses the whole thought of Leopardi: "Let us live, my Porphyry, and together comfort each other; let us not refuse to bear that part which destiny has assigned to us of the evils of our race". A fundamental conflict in Leopardi's soul makes him cleave to the life his reason disdained, and out of this conflict springs his subtly lyrical poetry. It is the clash between Leopardi's reason and its peer, his imagination, and it brings us to one of the most significant aspects of his spiritual life.

### V

Leopardi's reason has convinced him of the illusoriness of all that might make life worth living, has convinced him of the actuality of stupid, wicked woe as the sum and substance of the world. But his imagination lays hold on this sorry texture of life and irradiates it with its own glow of noble passion. In the very expression of his conviction that life is of no worth, worth most precious is experienced. This is the salvation of the philosopher by the poet. "The philosopher is not perfect if he is merely a philosopher. . . . Reason needs the imagination and the illusions which reason destroys." Precisely in this intense dualism and conflict are we to seek the dynamic force of Leopardi's

poetry. Leopardi himself, early in his poetic career, recognized the character of his lyric activity: "Works of genius have this peculiarity that, even when they represent the nothingness of things, even when they clearly demonstrate and make us feel the inevitable unhappiness of life, when they express the most terrible moods of despair, yet to a great mind, even though it may be in a state of extreme depression, disillusionment, blankness, ennui, and weariness of life, or in the bitterest and most paralyzing misfortunes (whether with reference to deep and strong feelings or to anything else), they always serve as a consolation, rekindle enthusiasm; and though they treat of and represent no other subject than death, they restore to such a mind, at least momentarily, that life which it had lost. . . . And the very knowledge of the irreparable vanity and falseness of everything beautiful and great is in itself a certain beauty and greatness which fills the soul, when this knowledge is found in works of genius. The very contemplation of nothingness is a thing in these works which seems to enlarge the soul of the reader, to exalt it and satisfy it with itself and its own despair. . . ."

It is no ordinary inconsistency we have here, no mere refusal to face the logic of one's argument. Leopardi's reason faces it: that life is worthless; but this further has to be taken into account, which reason cannot readily conceive: can a life be utterly worthless whose vanity has been so nobly and beautifully uttered; can love and beauty, virtue and justice and glory and truth be all illusory, if in imagination they have been so perfectly expressed? We shall fail to comprehend Leopardi's work if we treat him only as a pessimistic intellect. Confronting the intellect and sublimating its conclusions is the imagination of the poet. In lyric contemplation thought itself is swallowed up and

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despair yields sweet negation. This poetic alchemy is disclosed in the little masterpiece *L'Infinito*:

Always dear to me was this lonely hill,  
Ay, and this hedge that from so broad a sweep  
Of the ultimate horizon screens the view.  
But, as I sit and gaze, my fancy feigns  
Space beyond space upon the further side,  
And silence within silence past all thought,  
Immeasurable calm; whereat well nigh  
Groweth the heart afraid. And as I hear  
The wind sigh through these thickets, then between  
That everlasting silence and this voice  
I make comparison; and call to mind  
The Eternal, and the ages dead, and this  
The living present, and its clamor. So  
In this immensity my thought is drowned:  
And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea.

So we read *Canto notturno*, in which man, face to face with nature, is revealed as less than nothing, and yet as sublime notwithstanding his nothingness; and *Aspasia*, bitter contrast of love's vision with the actuality of the beloved, humiliation not ignoble: and *Alla sua donna*, pure vision of the ideal lady:

Despite the countless woes  
By fate predestined unto Man from birth,  
If in thy essence, as my thought depicts thee,  
Thou wert belov'd, existence to thy lover  
Would be a heaven on earth.

This is not escape from woe, but sublimation of it. Even though the beast may be happier than man, since he desires less and thinks not at all; even though genius may be called a capacity for unhappiness; yet thought, which shatters man's happiness and discloses his nothingness, likewise exalts him. Pascal's reflection on man as a thinking reed has not escaped Leopardi: "Nothing proves the greatness and the power of the human intellect, or the loftiness or nobility of man, quite so much as man's ability to know and thoroughly to understand and to feel deeply his own little-

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ness." But is one to marvel or to rail at a Power which has given man the poetic reach for the sublime and has denied it attainment in actuality and reason? "*Bella provvidenza!*—Fine Providence!" Leopardi exclaims, perplexed by man's duality of character:

Humanity, if wholly  
Worthless and frail thou art,  
Mere dust and shade, how can thy feelings show  
Such loftiness? If part  
Divine, how can thy noblest impulses  
And thoughts with so much ease  
Be roused and quenched alike by things so low?

Perplexed he is, but not crestfallen, nor will he settle back in stagnant desolation. Be the world and life as it may, aspire and create he will, for it is the wine of his being. He perceives clearly that "all the value of human life is in the creation of the inner man." In the hazardous leap of the spirit towards the phantoms that ennoble life, Leopardi finds the only true dignity and the salvation of our souls. This is no easy going or calculating hedonist, but a grimly heroic soul:

At all times I have viewed  
Craven and abject souls  
Disdainfully . . .

"Man, who gets used to anything, cannot get used to inaction," Leopardi writes, and, again in the *Zibaldone*, combing his languages to find a word that will best express the forward reach of the heroic: "One should live *εἰκῇ*, *temere*, *à l'hazard*, *alla ventura*."

But reason proclaims all aspiration futile and heroism ridiculous. Leopardi himself repeatedly ridicules the modern cult of progress, particularly in the satirical *Palinodia*. Despondent pages about progress abound also in the *Zibaldone*. Isn't self-perfection futile? In trying to rise out

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of the morass of life we only sink more deeply. Blessed be those of little soul and little thought: they are spared the great anguish. The poet's own life, however, was dominated by the heroic motive, notwithstanding the misgivings of his intellect. In an empirical world of mechanical necessity, Kant urged us to live *as if* God, freedom, and immortality were real. In a world vain, wicked, and woe-ful, Leopardi lived and created *as if* beauty, virtue, truth, were realities and not the phantoms that his reason proclaimed them to be. A call to high endeavor is the poem *To a Victor in the Ball-Game*, and the spirit of noble hazard inspires the *Dialogue of Christopher Columbus and Peter Gutierrez*. "What is understood by a state free from uncertainty and peril? If content and happy, it is to be preferred to any other whatever; if tedious and miserable, I do not see what other is not to be preferred to it."

This longing for unrealized worlds, and the sense of desolation and weariness in the midst of the actual, are modern, romantic emotions. They would have scandalized the ancients; but, as Graf observes, Petrarch could have understood them, and Pascal, and Chateaubriand. Leopardi's experience and estimate of this weariness, *noia*, were various, and his fragmentary writings about it are likely to confuse us. Sometimes *noia* is the utmost of insufferable monotony and stagnation, emptiness and desolation and disgust with life, a killing sense of the nothingness of all, "the most sterile of human passions, daughter and mother of nullity," weariness everlasting, *noia immortale*. Carducci has traced its genealogy to the *athymia* of St. John Chrysostom, the *acedia* of Christian cenobites, the *accidia* of Dante. To Jacopssen, Leopardi writes in June, 1823: "For some time I have felt the emptiness of existence as if it were something real which weighed heavily on my soul.

The nothingness of things was to me the only real thing. It was always with me, like a frightful phantom; I saw about me only a desert; I did not see how I could subject myself to the daily cares and exigencies of life, being quite sure that these cares would never lead to anything. This thought so obsessed me that I thought I should lose my reason."

Leopardi's *noia* is not mere negation, however; it is the sense of checked activity, frustrated attainment, yes; but it is not inactivity, it is not mere failure. Man is condemned to *noia* because he finds the world hemming him in, because, in his desire, thought, imagination, he is beyond and above the actual world that encases him. And a man will be the more surely destined to experience *noia* the more intense and the more expansive his desire or his spiritual activity. So *noia*, exquisite dolor of weariness, has also the element of sublimity. It is not any particular dolor or weariness, but "life itself fully felt, experienced, known, fully present to the individual and engrossing him." And this sense of the utter emptiness of life is not itself mere negation: itself is positive, and the intensity of imagination in works of genius makes the experience of *noia* sublimely beautiful. Thus weariness overcomes itself, *noia si dis-annoia*, "by the same lively feeling of universal and necessary weariness". The sublimity of *noia* is well expressed in *Pensieri* LXVII and LVIII; I quote the latter: "Life-weariness is in some respects the most sublime of human sentiments. Not that I believe that from the investigation of this sentiment those conclusions result which many philosophers have thought to gather from it; but nevertheless, to be unable to find satisfaction in any earthly thing, or, so to say, in the whole earth; to consider the inestimable amplitude of space, the number and astonishing mass of the

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worlds, and find that all is little and petty to the capacity of our soul; to imagine the number of the worlds infinite, and the universe infinite, and feel that our soul and our desire would be still greater than such an universe; always to accuse things of insufficiency and nullity, and endure that want and emptiness which we call life-weariness; this seems to me the greatest sign of grandeur and nobleness which human nature presents. Let it also be noted that life-weariness is scarcely known to insignificant persons, and very little or not at all to the lower animals."

Imagination saves us in a worthless world: we take refuge in our cherished illusions. Heroic aspiration saves us: we refuse to bow our head to the actual, and press forward to worlds unrealized. And sublime contemplation also saves us: in the noble perception of the emptiness which is life, life itself is transfigured by our very condemnation of it: the sublimity of the ideal judgment is thus revealed. These heroic emotions have in them nothing of arrogance or cruelty, nor hatred of one's fellows. Leopardi openly protests, and it is in the last volume of the *Zibaldone*: "My philosophy not only does not conduce to misanthropy, as some superficially observe, and as many accuse me; it essentially precludes misanthropy." *La Ginestra* has rightly been called, as for instance by Carducci, Leopardi's capital work. Here is the pitiful nothingness of man, against callous omnipotent nature, and here man's sublimity also, in refusing to submit and stagnate. Leopardi's poem is a call to mankind, to band in holy alliance of solidarity and brotherly love against the unfeeling brutality of nature:

Noble of nature he  
Who fearlessly can raise  
His mortal eyes and gaze  
Upon our common doom, and frankly owns,

Subtracting nought from truth,  
The evil apportioned us, and that our state  
Is humble and very weak;  
Who proves himself a great  
And gallant sufferer, and doth not seek  
To add fraternal strife,  
Worst of all ills in life,  
Unto his sorrows by accusing Man  
Of causing his distress, but lays the blame  
On the true culprit—her, who though of mortals  
Mother by birth, by choice is their stepdame.

Is virtue an illusion? "But, if this illusion were shared by all," Leopardi writes Jacopssen, "if all men believed, and wished to be virtuous, if they were compassionate, bountiful, generous, magnanimous, full of enthusiasm; in a word, if all the world were kind-hearted (for I see no difference between kindness and what is called virtue), would not all be happier?"

There is a paradox in Leopardi, which Francesco de Sanctis has expressed finely: "Leopardi produces the contrary effect of that which he intends. Not believing in progress, he makes you desire it; not believing in liberty, he makes you love it. He calls love and glory and virtue illusions, and kindles in your breast an endless desire for them. You cannot leave him without feeling yourself the better, and you cannot come near him without first wishing to pull yourself together and be purified, in order not to have to blush in his presence. He is a sceptic and makes you a believer; and while he sees no possibility of a less dismal future for our native land, he rouses in your breast an ardent love for it and fires your heart for noble deeds. He has so low an estimate of human nature, and his own soul lofty, gentle and pure, honors and ennobles it. . . ." The ardor of the ideal lover and the true hero animate him ever; one day he copied in large letters in his *Zibaldone* these words in which the Abbé Barthélemy eulogizes



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*Æschylus*: "His heroes would rather be struck by lightning than be guilty of any baseness, AND THEIR COURAGE IS MORE INFLEXIBLE THAN THE FATAL LAW OF NECESSITY."

Pessimism we have here, but the last moral of it is not altogether pessimistic. Leopardi's own creative achievement, his character and career, must be taken in the balance before we can accept as final his pessimistic estimate of this our world. For the world which Leopardi pronounced worthless included Leopardi himself: included not only the hunchback but also the poet-philosopher.